CHAPTER 14

Poems of Repentance and Consolation

The literary genre known as *consolatio* has its origins in Graeco-Roman tradition. Greek philosophers wrote consolatory works in prose in which arguments are developed that could offer comfort to those facing sorrow and death. Then Seneca (ca. 4 BC–65 AD) wrote three such works, including one addressed to a woman who had lost her son, and another to his own mother when he was sent into exile.[1] "Consolatio ad Liviam" is an anonymous poem, composed (probably in the first century BC) for the Roman Empress Livia following the death of her thirty-year-old son. Christian authors such as Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux developed the genre, incorporating consolatory arguments and strategies derived from Christian teaching and the Bible. Thus, once again, we can trace a post-Reformation literary form back to classical tradition (see Curtius 1953, 80–82). German baroque poets wrote *Trostlieder* [songs of consolation], and there are prose and verse works from this period entitled "Trauer und Trost" [Mourning and consolation]. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Icelandic manuscripts, several poems and hymns bear the title "Huggun" [Consolation] or "Huggunarvers" [Consolatory verse]. Prose works were also written and translated to help console the bereaved, such as Johann Gerhard's *Enchiridion consolatorium*, whose Icelandic

1. The works are *De consolatione ad Marciam*, *De consolatione ad Helviam matrem*, and *De Consolatione ad Polybium* (Harvey 1986, 389).

title is *Handbókarkorn í hvörju að fram settar verða hugganir þær sem menn skulu setja í móti dauðanum* [A short handbook in which those consolations are set out that should be used in the face of death] (1656). There are certainly links between consolatory prose and verse, and the latter is also associated with so-called penitence poetry.

Repentance and consolation are frequent motifs in religious verse, not least after the Reformation because of the emphasis that Lutheran theology places on sin, grace, the Law and the Gospel.[2] In order to access God's grace people need to acknowledge and confess their sins and weaknesses; the penitent's heart and mind must open up so that the soul may receive grace and consolation. This interplay between the Law and the Gospel is clearly discernible in a verse by Hallgrímur in which each word in the first two lines finds a contrastive echo in the last two. Here Moses symbolizes "the Law" or the Old Testament and Jesus "the Gospel" or the New Testament:

> Móises hrellir, heimtar, krefur
> hótar bölvun stríðri.
> Jesús huggar, hjálpar, gefur,
> heitir blessan þíðri.
> (Hallgrímur Pétursson 1887–90, 2:325)
>
> [Moses hectors, requests, demands,
> threatens a heavy curse.
> Jesus comforts, helps, provides,
> promises a warm blessing.]

The interplay of penitence and consolation can often be found in the same poem, while other pieces deal exclusively with one or the other. In Ólafur Jónsson of Sandar's introduction to his own poetic works he indicates that the first part is devoted "til lögmáls og evangelii" [to the Law and the Gospel], describing the first seven hymns as "iðranarkvæði" [penitential poems] (see NKS 139 b 4to).

2. The Law is a term used for the Old Testament (Moses and the prophets) and the strong demands it makes on mankind in terms of blameless behavior, while the Gospel involves Jesus' New Testament message about forgiveness and grace for those who believe in him.

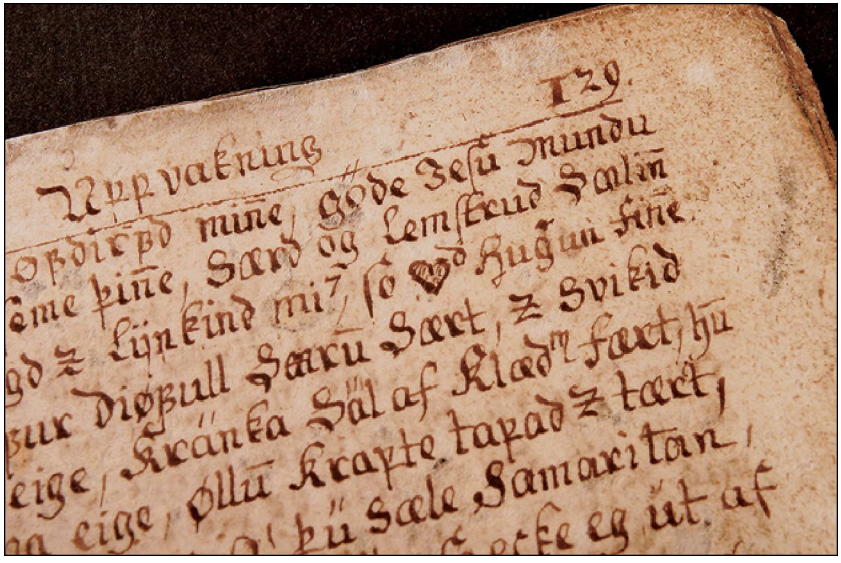
Krummacher (1976) believes that transience (*memento mori*) poems should be regarded as penitential pieces in that they urge people to repent by confronting them with terrifying images of decay, decomposition and death. It is quite possible that Hallgrímur's poem "Allt heimsins glysið, fordild fríð" [All the world's finery, frivolous vanity] was composed for just this purpose; to encourage people to acknowledge the worthlessness of earthly things and thus to provoke them into embracing the true faith. Promotion of that faith is only a small part of the poem, however; the main section, depicting disintegration and destruction, exhorts people to repent of their sins.

Hallgrímur's hymn "Aví, minn Drottinn dýri" [Hail, my precious Lord] (Hallgrímur Pétursson 1887–90, 2:190–192) is certainly a penitence poem. Its meter is one frequently used by Hallgrímur, and the melody is "Ó, Jesú eðla blómi" [O, Jesus, noble flower]. In verse 2 the interplay between repentance and consolation is very clear: "Synd mín er sandi fleiri / særir það hjartans grunn / náð þín er miklu meiri / mér er hún orðin kunn" [My sins are more than (grains of) sand, / this scars the heart's depths; / your grace is much more, / is known to me]. Penitence poems often lament mankind's lot: the grief, isolation, and friendlessness ("Mannleg hjálp mest vill þrjóta" [human help will fail first], as it says at the opening of verse 3). In Hallgrímur's hymn the final part of each verse is devoted to prayer, expressed in terse subjunctive or imperative sentences:

> græð hana [sálina], guð eini,
> geðpína að linist,
> blóð sonar grið greini,
> grátin kætist sýn.
> (Hallgrímur Pétursson 1887–90, 2:191)
>
> [O One and Only God, heal it [the soul],
> that heart-sorrow may be less,
> may the Son's blood grant mercy,
> may tearful vision be made joyous.]

"Guð á himnum hjálpi mér / og huggi sálu mína" [May God in heaven help me, / and comfort my soul] deals with both penitence

and consolation (Hallgrímur Pétursson 1887–90, 2:290–296). In verse 1 the situation to be remedied is identified: the grief, anxiety, sorrow, and sin that lie heavy in the narrator's spirit. The first part of the hymn is a confession of sin, not least with reference to "liðinnar ævi tíðir" [times of a former age]. It proceeds through all the stages of life, starting with birth (or, rather, with conception: "Getinn var ég í sekt og synd" [Conceived I was in guilt and sin]), followed by childhood, youth and so on into maturity. Yet despite good intentions everything seems to go the same negative way, for throughout his life the narrator's thoughtless and irreligious behavior has offended and angered God. In verse 10, right in the middle of the hymn, the narrator acknowledges that while he cannot save himself from his difficulties, "Jesús minn hefur nóga náð / nú vil ég þangað leita" [My Jesus has grace enough / now I wish to seek him out]. The mood then changes; descriptions of sin give way to the search for Christ: "Þó stærri verði misgjörð mín / en má ég sjálfur greina / meiri er, Jesús, miskunn þín / mildust, gæskuhreina [Though my misdeeds were greater / than I myself can gauge, / even greater, Jesus, is your mercy / most mild, purely



"svo hjartað huggun finni": from "Guð á himnum hjálpi mér," Lbs 1724 8vo, p. 129. Landsbókasafn Íslands–Háskólabókasafn [National and University Library of Iceland]. Photograph: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir.

good] (verse 11). The poet refers to the Gospels, as when in verse 13 he addresses Jesus as "ó, þú sæti Samarítan" [O, you sweet Samaritan] and likens himself to the prodigal son who returns home after spending all his inheritance and enduring hunger and humiliation. Jesus is duly asked to heal and release the narrator from bondage, "svo finni ég huggun þína" [so that I might find your consolation]. In the closing verses the poet directs his prayers to God—Father, Son and Holy Ghost—and refers to all persons of the Trinity: "Hjá föður þínum legg mér lið / lausnarinn Jesú góði" [With your Father help me, / good Jesus, Holy Redeemer] (verse 17); "Framdar syndir forlát mér / faðirinn dýrðar sæli / fyrir dýrstan Jesú dreyra hér" [For sins committed forgive me, / blessed Father of Glory, / for Jesus' most precious blood here] (verse 18); "Heilags anda hjálpin þíð / hug og sinni geymi" [May the Holy Spirit's help / preserve you in heart and thought] (verse 20). The poem turns, finally, to preparations for death and the life ever after, as the last verse praises the one God in three persons who offers solace:

Allar skepnur alla tíð
af öllum hug og rómi
syngi þér lof sem veröld er víð,
voldugur Drottinn frómi,
Jesú Kristí þökkin þíð
þar með fögur hljómi,
Heilögum Anda á himni og láð
fyrir huggun, styrk og líknarráð
aukist æra og sómi.
(Hallgrímur Pétursson 1887–90, 2:296)

[May all creatures for all time,
with all heart and voice,
sing your praise as the world is wide,
pure and mighty Lord;
warm thanks to Jesus Christ,
with a wondrous sound;
and to the Holy Spirit in heaven and earth,
for solace, strength and charity,
may honor and glory be granted.]

The hymn "Aví, minn Guð, álít þá nauð" [Hail, my God, pay heed to this distress] (Hallgrímur Pétursson 1887–90, 2:226–229) is a poem of penitence and consolation that can be divided into two sections. The poet talks not only for himself but also on behalf of all God's children. Each of the hymn's fourteen verses ends with the same wording repeated in a different meter: "Vor Jesú kær, vertu mér nær og vernda sálu mína" [Our precious Jesus, be near to me and protect my soul] (verse 1). While the penultimate line in each stanza remains the same, the final one varies; thus, in verse 5, it reads: "Vor Jesú kær, vertu mér nær, / vægð þína send mér blíða" [Our dear Jesus, be near to me, your tender mercy send to me]. Verses 1–7 speak of the unavoidable adversities that confront God's children in this world. There is generally some sort of "kross" [cross] to bear, and with difficulties come temptations: "andskotinn sár, samviskan dár, / sjálfur heimurinn argi" [devil cruel, conscience mocking, / the world itself miserable].

These three elements are explained further in the next verse; the devil prepares a list of sins for the intimidated soul, the Law awakens the soul's conscience, and the world asks derisively, "Hvar er þinn Guð / hverjum þú fram réðst falla?" [Where is your God / before whom you knelt?]. The poem's turning point occurs in verse 8, where the poet asks "hvert skal ég ráða leita [. . .] hvar mun ég hjástoð finna?" [where shall I seek help [. . .] where may I find support?]. The next five stanzas provide the answer, which involves directing the inner vision toward Jesus, who protects the soul against all the foes previously identified in the poem. This section represents a single, continuous expression of solace, before the final verse is given over to praise:

> Eilíf lofdýrð ætíð sé skýrð
> af englum bæði og mönnum
> kónginum þeim sem kristna um heim
> með krafti verndar sönnum,
> vegsemdar tón með sætan són
> sé þér, minn Jesú, framinn.
> Vor Jesú kær, vertu mér nær,
> vernda sál mín, amen.
> (Hallgrímur Pétursson 1887–90, 2:229)

[May eternal praise always flow
from both angels and mankind
to that monarch who Christians in the world
with righteous might protects;
may sweet-toned praise
be sounded for you, my Jesus.
Our precious Jesus, be near to me,
protect my soul, amen.]

"Syng þú lof Drottni sála mín" [Sing praise to the Lord, O my soul] (Hallgrímur Pétursson 1887–90, 2:192–195) is "Bæn iðrandi og trúaðs manns" [A prayer of a penitent man of faith]. The hymn's twelve stanzas follow the same pattern already outlined in this chapter, but give expression to theological conviction rather than personal troubles. The importance of praising God is underlined at the outset with a reference to the Psalms of David; then comes confession of sins, once again with a scriptural inflection: "sjá fleiri eru afbrot mín / sandi á sjávarbotni" [behold my sins / are more than sand grains on ocean-floor] (verse 3). Verses 6 and 7 explain in a somewhat bookish way the importance of repentance and its links with the Eucharist, through which God's charitable deeds are sacramentally confirmed. Yet both before and after this verse, there are expressions of penitence and a prayer for grace, emphasized by repetition. Thus, in verse 9:

Hjálpa þú mér, ó herra Guð,
hjálpa þú sálu minni,
hjálpa þú mér í himnafrið,
hjálpa þú skepnu þinni,
hjálpaðu mér frá heljar neyð,
hjálpa mér fyrir Jesú deyð,
hjálp þín mér huggun vinni.
(Hallgrímur Pétursson 1887–90, 2:194–195)

[Help me, O Lord God;
help my soul;
help me into heavenly peace,
help your created one,

help me from hell's distress,
help me for Jesus' death,
your help—may it bring me solace.]

The hymn beginning "Á einum Guði er allt mitt traust" [In one God is all my trust] (Hallgrímur Pétursson 1887–90, 2:266–268) has the title "Huggunarsálmur í krossi og mótlæti" [A hymn of consolation in turmoil and adversity].[3] Each of its eight stanzas ends with a virtual repetition of the penultimate line while the last line changes, as for example with "almáttug Drottins hægri hönd / hún kann því öllu að breyta" [Almighty God's right hand / it can change everything] (verse 1); "nema míns Drottins hægri hönd / hún kann allt böl að stilla" [except my Lord's right hand / can all misfortune calm] (verse 3); "eins skammtar Drottins hægri hönd / hverri sorg tíð og máta" [as the Lord's right hand apportions / to every sorrow time and shape] (verse 7). The main emphasis of the hymn is on the weight of the Cross, adversity, and the spiritual and physical suffering that is underlined by beginning verse 2 with "Innra" [inner], the third with "Ytra" [outer], while in verse 4 we find "ytra barátta, innra stríð" [outer battle, inner struggle]. The opening verse functions as an introduction in which the consolatory purpose of the poem is made clear: "Á einum Guði er allt mitt traust / engu skal ég því kvíða" [In one God is all my trust, / I shall therefore fear nothing]. The next four verses describe the narrator's dire situation while the three final verses offer consolation through reassuring words and repetitions: "Trúr er minn Guð sem treysti ég á / trúr er Jesús minn herra" [True is my God in whom I trust, / true is Jesus my Lord] (verse 7), and still further in the eighth verse that forms the climax of the hymn:

Vil ég nú gjarnan vera til friðs,
vil ég því engu kvíða,
vil ég af Drottni vænta liðs,
vil ég svo þreyja og bíða,
minn herra Jesú meinin vönd

3. The title in Lbs 1536 8vo; other titles include "Sálmur í mannraunum og mótlæti" [A hymn in trials and adversity].

mýkir og allan trega,
hans almáttuga hægri hönd
hjálpi mér eilíflega.
(Hallgrímur Pétursson 1887–90, 2:268)

[I will now earnestly be at peace;
I will therefore fear nothing,
I will hope for help from the Lord,
I will thus yearn and wait;
My Lord Jesus wicked harm
softens and all sorrow;
his almighty right hand—
may it help me forever.]

It is of course no coincidence that the final verse includes a reference to eternal welfare in a salvational sense. As we will see later (p. 380) Hallgrímur points out that in biblical terms the hand of God signifies heaven or the blessed realm of the chosen.

The poem "Þú kristin sála þjáð og mædd" [You Christian soul, suffering and weary] (Hallgrímur Pétursson 1887–90, 2:277–282) bears the title "Huggun í krossi og mótgangi" [Consolation in hardship and adversity]. Its eighteen verses can be divided into two sections. Unlike Hallgrímur's other consolatory poems, the narrator is concerned not with solace for himself but for another, who is addressed in the second person. Verses 1–2 serve as the introduction or *exordium*, with a "kristin sála" [Christian soul] addressed and its current condition described. It is weary from the burden of the Cross, "kvíðir máske við dauða" [it may be anxious about death], and needs fortifying. This description of the situation represents the *narratio*. The main part of the poem presents reasons (*argumenta*) and instances (*exempla*) in support of the *argumentatio*, which is that those weary with sorrow should receive solace. Then verse 3, which functions as a link to the next structural element (*propositio*), states that adversity is a divine strategy designed to weaken individuals' attachment to (or even love of) the world. This is the first stage in the argument, and the next is linked to it: just as a mother and child kiss and embrace even after discipline has been administered, so God is a good father who wishes the best for all

of us (verse 5). The next examples derive from scripture. The first of these is from Isaiah 49:15 (AV): "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee." Reference is then made to Job, Moses, and David, before a whole verse is devoted to Mary, the Mother of God. No one was more beloved by the Lord and yet no one suffered as she did. Finally, Christ is named and his suffering as a bridegroom; so must his bride (that is, every Christian) suffer.

In the second section of the poem, beginning at verse 10, objections to the poem's arguments are raised and then refuted individually (*refutatio*): "Kannske að þar um kvartir þú [. . .]" [Perhaps about this you will complain [. . .]].[4] We are told that faith and patience are not human achievements but gifts of the Holy Spirit; that though prayer is feeble and stiff Jesus can warm everything that seems cold; and that time is relative, for whatever seems prolonged may prove to be very short as eternity approaches, whether in the form of death or doomsday. The relationship between mother and child is then cited: the mother extends her greatest love to the child who is most ill and the same is true of God. A further biblical reference follows in verse 15: God does not tear a broken reed in two, and he seeks out his lost sheep and carries it home on his shoulders; the Bridegroom will return and dry all our tears. The final section of the poem (verses 17–18) takes the form of praise but also serves as the conclusion (*peroratio*). God is lauded for having given hope to mankind and we glimpse all those who are saved singing the *Sanctus* in "himnaríkis helgri borg" [the holy city of heaven].

Most of the poem's images are connected with women or the role of the mother or, as when Jesus is named, with marriage. This involves the image that each Christian soul is linked to Christ like a bride to a groom, and this comparison has generally appealed more to women than men. The consolation here may well be directed toward a woman (or women). It is also obvious that the poet places a high priority on following rhetorical tradition. The poem is composed to the melody "Náttúran öll og eðli manns [All nature

4. See Þórir Óskarsson and Þorleifur Hauksson 1994, 18 and Breuer 1990, 116.

and the nature of man], a hymn included in the 1589 *Sálmabók*; it is a translation of "Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verderbt" [Through Adam's fall is everything corrupt], a hymn composed by Lazarus Spengler (1479–1534) (Páll E. Ólason 1924, 148–149). Each stanza features internal rhyme in lines 5 and 7:

> þrey, þol og *líð*, bíð vona og *bíð*
> bölið fær góðan enda;
> þá neyð er *hæst* herrann er *næst*
> hann mun þér fögnuð senda.
> (Hallgrímur Pétursson 1887–90, 2:277)

> [endure, bear and suffer; pray, hope, and wait,
> misfortune will end well;
> when need is greatest the Lord is closest,
> he will send you joy.]

In this verse we have a list of verbs whereas nouns are listed in verse 13, "lifum með fró, / frið, sælu og ró" [let us live in comfort, / peace, joy, and calm], and again in the final verse, "lof, heiður, prís, / sæmd, sómi vís [. . .]" [praise, esteem, worth, / honor, certain respect]. There are several comparisons: "*Allt eins* fer Drottinn að við oss" [just as the Lord fares with us] and "*eins* er Guðs hönd" [as is God's hand]. Another rhetorical figure used is *epitheton ornans*, verbal decoration used to fill out a line, as with "miskunnar faðirinn *blíður* [. . .], sú *milda* mær [. . .], guðs börnin *blíð* [. . .], *blíðri* brúður [. . .]" [The *gentle* Father of mercy [. . .], the *tender* maid [. . .], God's *gentle* children [. . .] the *gentle* bride [. . .]]. Rhetorical theory identified the principal aim of poetry as persuading and convincing its readers/listeners, and rhetoric is deployed here for that purpose, with questions (*interrogatio*) such as "Hver var meir virt en Maríá? Hver má oss þaðan draga? Hvað viltu girnast fremur?" [Who was more honored than Mary? Who may lead us from there? What do you long for more?] (lines 279, 281), or by beginning stanzas with declarations ("Þú sér [. . .]" [You see], "Heyr hvað [. . .]" [listen to what], "Gæt að [. . .]" [take care that], "Hygg að [. . .]" [consider that]) or answers ("Já, Guð vildi" [Yes, God wished]) (279).

Only one of Hallgrímur's consolatory hymns (other than his commemorative pieces) was composed for a known occasion, and that is the poem written after the 1662 Saurbær fire. Both Petter Dass and Dorothe Engelbretsdatter composed similar pieces after fires in Bergen in 1686 (Dorothe) and 1702 (Dass). Laila Akslen comments that writing poems about disasters was popular in the baroque period; poets were attracted by war, pestilence, disease, accidents, and death. The seventeenth century had its full share of such events, notably the Thirty Years' War and its associated miseries (Akslen 1997:89).

We may add that the perceived role of poet and poetry encouraged the composition of such pieces. One function of poetry was to respond to contemporary circumstances whenever appropriate, and in times of crisis it was natural for poets to react by composing consolatory pieces. Laila Akslen rightly points out that "etter dei klassiske retoriske reglane høyrer dei til *consolatio*-sjangeren" [by the rules of classical rhetoric they [Norwegian poems about the Bergen fire] belong to the *consolatio* genre] (Akslen 1997, 89). However, Dass did not assign the terms *consolatio* or "trøstedigt" to his poems but rather "Plaster tjenlig at lægge paa de brændte saar indbyggerne i Bergens stad blev plaget med den 19de maj 1702" [A plaster to place on the burns of the residents of Bergen when the city was afflicted on 19 May 1702] (Dass 1980, 1:224). "Plaster" here means "healing poultice," and Sejersted has shown how this title points to the text's consolatory function (Sejersted 1995, 128). Though Hallgrímur's poem may belong to the same genre, the difference is that whereas in Bergen many people lost their homes, the Saurbær piece focuses on just the poet and his household as they deal with damage and loss. The poem (Hallgrímur Pétursson 1887–90, 2:170–172) begins:

> Guð er minn guð þó geysi nauð
> og gangi þannin yfir
> syrgja skal spart þó missta eg margt
> máttugur herrann lifir
> af hjarta nú og hreinni trú
> til hans skal eg mér venda.
> Nafn Drottins sætt fær bölið bætt
> blessað sé það án enda.

[God is my God though trouble may erupt
and overwhelm in this way;
mourn shall I little though much have I lost.
the Lord Almighty lives;
now with heart and true faith
to him will I turn.
The Lord's sweet name will heal the bale,
blessed be that name without end.]

Hallgrímur's "Hugbót" [Comfort for the mind] is just five stanzas long and sets out the reasons why he should reconcile himself to the Saurbær disaster. The poem's consolatory status seems clear from phrases such as "syrgja skal spart" [mourn shall I little], "sorgin skal öll því dvína" [all sorrow shall thus lessen], while the poet's belief that God is ever-present offers lasting comfort. The poem does not describe the state of mind of someone in shock or distress, still less depict the damage itself. The text offers comfort—perhaps not just to the poet himself but also to his family, household, and anyone else touched by the disaster. The sources of solace derive from Christian teaching and the Bible. The poet first refers to Job 1:21 (AV): ". . .the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord":

Gaf mér hans náð gott lukkuráð
að gleðinnar eflist kraftur
frjálst á hann þá og fullvel má
frá mér taka það aftur
[. . .]
(Hallgrímur Pétursson 1887–90, 2:171)

[His grace gave me good fortune,
that joy's strength would grow;
then is he free—and may well—
(to) take it back
[. . .].]

From the knowledge that it is the Lord who gives and takes away comes the conviction (as expressed in the following verse)

that neither the devil nor accident caused the fire. Men are not controlled by the Evil One; their fate lies in God's hands. The next argument deployed is that God loves even as he disciplines. The narrator comes to accept this and submits all that he has to God: health, good fortune, wealth, and honor. The final verse is a prayer that refers indirectly to the biblical Job ("Þótt ég missi allt eins og Job" [even if I lose everything like Job]). The poem's structure is typically baroque, with parallel images or arguments assembled, and with facts followed by an interpretation designed to promote an overall message—in this instance, consolation. Each stanza has the same final line refrain: "Nafn Drottins sætt fær bölið bætt / blessað sé það án enda" [The Lord's sweet name will heal the bale; blessed may it be without end]. As usual the final verse refers to heaven, for it is the natural final emphasis, the eternal salvational framework, from which the solace derives.

Though poems of penitence and consolation are heavily formulaic, both theologically and rhetorically, it is not difficult to believe that they were also psychologically important. They provided a way for painful emotions and experiences to find structured expression and must have been a source of release and comfort for many a reader or listener. As such the popularity of European and native religious poetry in the Icelandic "age of learning" is entirely understandable.